

To be or not to be

By Dr Ross J. Todd

*To be or not to be, that is the question
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing, end them.
(William Shakespeare: Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 1)*

In recent months there has been considerable discussion around the world about the future of libraries in general, as well as school libraries. To be or not to be has emerged as a crucial question. These discussions are set amidst some strong and persuasive viewpoints that such institutions are no longer necessary due to the availability of information technology, access to vast quantities of information on the Internet, the costly nature of the physical infrastructure, increasing cost of print materials, and the cost of library personnel. On top of this, there is research that shows that people, particularly students, are using libraries less since they first began using internet research tools, and that search engines are the primary starting point for information searching rather than library catalogues. Across the USA, the financial crisis has impacted many school districts, and has raised the question of the viability of school libraries, and the role of a professionally trained school librarian. CISSL's response, particularly to the economic scenarios in the USA, is available at the CISSL website: www.cissl.rutgers.edu, in a document titled 'School Libraries Now, More than Ever' (Todd & Gordon, 2010). While there is certain gloom and pessimism, I strongly believe that these are opportune times – to rethink, reimagine and reengineer the future of school libraries.

Several recent events and research studies give clarity to this picture. The School Libraries Futures Project, commissioned by the Director, Curriculum K-12, NSW Department of Education and Training (DET NSW (Australia) in June 2009, sought to gather a diverse range of viewpoints and perspectives on status and future of school libraries with a view to identifying directions, challenges, and support for the continuous improvement of the information landscape in NSW government schools (Hay & Todd, 2010). A report of this discussion is available at:

<http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/schoollibraries/assets/pdf/21cexsum.pdf>

Responses were collected through an online blog, with 225 responses providing insights into the following questions:

1. The future of school libraries
 - (1a) Do we need a school library in 21st century schools?
 - (1b) How, if at all, do current school libraries impact on student learning?
2. The school library of the future
 - (2a) What would a school library of the future look like?
 - (2b) What would be its primary responsibilities and functions to meet the learning goals of schools?
 - (2c) What would be the essential work of the teacher-librarian?
 - (2d) What would be its key impacts on student learning?
3. What will it take to get there?
 - (3a) Identify strategies/initiatives/support at the practitioner level
 - (3b) Identify strategies/initiatives/support at the school level
 - (3c) Identify strategies/initiatives/support at the NSW Department of Education level.

Participants in this forum were very clear that school libraries are an important part of school life. They positioned the school library as supporting learning across the school, directly connected to the curriculum. Participants saw that in the rapid growth of the digital networked information environment, the primary

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function of the school library is not so much the collection, organisation and access of information, rather, as a common place across the school for investigating, experimenting with, and using information and IT. The school library's primary function is the provision of access and the use of information and web tools to empower learning through creativity, discovery, inquiry, cooperation, and collaboration. As a shared space for all students and the community, it is the centre for information-based pedagogy, pedagogical experimentation, and pedagogical fusion, where students are guided by teams of professionals to effectively utilise information and the most appropriate technology tools to support knowledge development, values and ethics related to the use of information and the production of knowledge. More than ever, such empowerment is needed. As such, the school library is a zone of intervention and socialisation for learning how to function effectively in the complex informational and technological world. It supports and enriches curriculum outcomes and extends learning beyond school. Balance and equity are essential dynamics: providing for a common, equitable, safe and stable information access to all, regardless of socio-economic status, and regardless of access to information technologies out of school (Hay & Todd, 2010).

As such, the school library is conceived as a flexible and dynamic learning space, the learning intersection between digital and print information in and beyond school, a centre for inquiry, discovery, creativity, innovation, where students' expertise of learning with and through information and IT tools to create knowledge is developed. The participants also held the view that such a centre for intellectual agency exists as a 24/7 environment, supporting the knowledge building process out of school through the provision of a central portal for knowledge development: tools, techniques, processes, and support.

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What this suggests to me is that however we might conceptualise the school library as a physical and virtual entity of the future, its central dynamic is not about space or location, but rather, the capacity to lead and

enable the transformation of information in all its forms to new knowledge. As I see it, the primary focus for teacher-librarians is on *building capacity for critical engagement with information to create knowledge* – giving emphasis to thinking creatively, critically and reflectively with information and using IT tools and applications in the process of building, producing and sharing knowledge and understanding. This means that the primary instructional role shifts from teaching students to find information to doing something with the found information – to inquiry, discovery and knowledge creation. For teachers, the school library becomes a *centre of learning innovation* where teachers and teacher-librarians are involved in creatively designing learning experiences through engaging with information in complex ways: testing, trialling, and experimenting with information and IT tools to bring about the best knowledge outcomes for students.

It has been pleasing to see that many of these ideas have been given voice through the Parliament of Australia's (House of Representatives) inquiry into school libraries and teacher-librarians. This has been a welcome opportunity to mobilise many stakeholders to provide sustained arguments in relation to building a sustainable future of school libraries. The scope and richness of the submissions, available at

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<http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/edt/schoollibraries/index.htm>, are outstanding – drawing on available research, documenting evidence of impact, and illustrated by multiple cases of best practice. While the outcomes of this process have not been determined at time of writing, voices are being heard, and such voices are defining the future of school libraries. A central thread running through this documentation is the importance of quality teaching and teacher-librarians as teachers. Quality teaching is at the heart of a sustainable future of school libraries. It defines the future and sustainability of school libraries. This means that the primary action centres on teaching: teaching that fosters discovery, inquiry, critical thinking, creativity and the development of deep knowledge and understanding. Meta-analyses of research (for example, Professor John Hattie's work on influences on student learning and achievement, available at: http://www.teacherstoolbox.co.uk/T_effect_sizes.html) show that the most significant impacts on achievement are the role of teacher and quality of instruction, developing a supportive learning environment, engaging students in discovery, inquiry, critical thinking and knowledge building. If teacher-librarians are not extensively engaged in teaching, then the impact of the school library on learning is not reaching its full potential. Professor Mary Gaver, who undertook some of the earliest research looking at the value of school libraries in

the 1950s, saw the emphasis on the educational program with teaching at its heart, not the information program:

'With the school library literally the heart of the educational program, the students of the school have their best chance to become capable and enthusiastic readers, informed about the world around them, and alive to the limitless possibilities of tomorrow' (Gaver, 1958).

On August 9th, I took part in a pre-conference as part of IFLA, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, in *Göteborg*, Sweden. The theme of the IFLA conference was 'Open access to knowledge: promoting sustainable progress'. The school library pre-conference discussed the question of 'The future for school libraries in a national and international perspective'. The documentation of this conference, including the printed introduction, podcasted recordings and PowerPoint presentations of the lectures, photos and links, is available at the Ning:

<http://skolebibliotek.ning.com/group/thefutureofschoollibrariesinanationalandinternatio> Again, one of the recurring themes, central to a sustainable future for school libraries, was the primary function of teaching. Pedagogy, not information, defines the future of school libraries. A key challenge that emerged was the importance of defining the future of school libraries in terms of pedagogy and outcomes, rather than by inputs and processes. Here is my definition of what the school library should be:

the school's physical and virtual information-to-knowledge commons where reading, literacy, inquiry, thinking, imagination, discovery, and creativity are central to students' learning and knowledge development in all curriculums, and in learning for work and life in a global, increasingly digital world.

I have just read a thoughtful piece of research, titled: 'Exploration to Identify Professional Dispositions of School Librarians: A Delphi Study' (Bush & Jones, 2010), and available at:

http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/aasl/aaslpubsandjournals/slmrb/slmrcontents/volume13/bush_jones.cfm

This paper presents results of a study to identify professional dispositions of school librarians. Using the Delphi method, participants initially and independently described dispositions necessary to sustain the school library profession in the future, and then reacted to a number of dispositions that received the most responses, and ranked and combined categories of dispositions. In this study, dispositions refer to ongoing beliefs and attitudes that guide thinking and intellectual behavior that can be measured through actions taken.

The key finding emerging from this study centres on the need for school librarians to be recognised predominantly for their quality teaching, and from a distinctly school library perspective. And here we come back to the central theme: a sustainable future for school libraries centres on quality teaching - developing inquiry, working transformatively to enable engagement and knowledge development. The school library, however it is conceived as a space and place, is a communal space for building knowledge societies. According to Bush and Jones:

it 'provides for a learning environment where inquiry reigns, access is universal, and minds meet to construct new understandings . . . The school librarian not only focuses on integrating content in the curriculum but also focuses on the learner, on guiding and influencing an openness to new ideas and ways of making meaning, of critical and creative thinking, of building on the knowledge of the student as learner throughout each developmental stage. Here the library becomes a way of learning rather than a physical or virtual space—it becomes embedded in the life of student's mind as the student has access over time to changing resources depending on discipline and developmentally appropriate resource allocation.

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One final piece of this jigsaw is the research study that my CISSL team has just completed in New Jersey. This study, entitled 'One Common Goal: Student Learning', was commissioned by the New Jersey Association of School Librarians (NJASL) in 2009. This multiphase study seeks to construct a picture of the status of New Jersey's

school libraries in the educational landscape of the state; to understand the contribution of quality school libraries to education in New Jersey; and to understand the contextual and professional dynamics that inhibit

and enable school libraries to contribute significantly to education in the state. The first phase, reported here, provided a comprehensive picture of the status of school libraries in New Jersey, including their instructional program, reading and related activities, collections, budgets, facilities, information technology, personnel, and the work of the school librarian. 765 valid responses were received, representing 30% of the schools in New Jersey. In a nutshell, the findings of this survey show that New Jersey school libraries and the work of school librarians contribute in rich and diverse ways to the intellectual life of a school, and to the development of students who can learn and function in rich, complex and increasingly digital information environments. School libraries in New Jersey that are staffed by certified school librarians provide common information grounds for supporting learning across the school through engagement with information, with particular emphasis on developing students' abilities to interact with information and to use it to learn well. This contribution is underpinned by an information and technology infrastructure and enabled through strong instructional, service, and administrative roles of school librarians.

However, it is the teaching role of school librarians that stands out in these findings. The large number of collaborations developing information literacy, IT and inquiry capabilities show a strong level of engagement in teaching and learning. The qualitative survey responses collectively portray the school library primarily as an agency for intellectual development, and for the social and cultural growth of students as they grow up in a complex and diverse information world. Based on the evidence the school librarians provided in this study, the school library contributes to intellectual growth in the following ways: helping students directly meet core curriculum content standards; developing a wide range of information handling and knowledge creation competencies; providing students with the intellectual and technical scaffolds they need to learn and to be ethical and productive users and consumers of information; and nurturing and supporting students as readers in digital and print environments by contributing to the reading and literacy agenda of schools.

Responses of participants, particularly to open questions, convey a sense of strong and active commitment and participation to a whole-school team approach to teaching that works toward meeting curriculum standards, engaging students, and helping them achieve academically. This commitment extends beyond the provision of library services to embrace and support all aspects of school life. The strong instructional role portrays a commitment to intellectual quality as a key learning outcome, underpinned by authentic and powerful inquiry-based pedagogy centering on knowledge development, intellectual engagement and inquiry.

Pedagogy: this is the future school library. We need a learning commons that is defined by an inquiry-based information-to-knowledge pedagogy, quality teaching, and teacher-librarians as quality teachers.

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